

HOW TO IMPROVE RECYCLING IN THE CITY OF FAIRFAX

submitted by the City of Fairfax Environmental Sustainability Committee

The ESC appreciates City Council's interest in improving the City's recycling program and appreciates the opportunity to make some recommendations it expects will improve the various elements of our recycling program. The ESC is of the belief that there are concrete actions the city can take to improve our program and improve our statewide ranking. Recycling is also a vital component of our efforts to reduce waste. While the traditional and primary goal of waste management is to remove waste efficiently and effectively, today it is acknowledged that there are significant environmental and financial costs of waste management that can be addressed through a waste reduction program. The ESC understands that the city will be undertaking an update of its 2009 Waste Management Plan and looks forward to playing a supportive role in that process.

The City is well known for delivering a “gold standard” waste management program to its citizens. Stories such as trash cans collected from inside the garage of an elderly neighbor are common, our staff tackle large piles of debris from basement or garage cleanouts on a regular basis at no additional cost to the resident. However, this gold standard program we enjoy does not specifically address City Council’s desire to have one of the best recycling rates in the State, as well as other developing demands, and as with other city programs, already faces cost pressures.

The ESC believes that the City’s “gold standard” reputation can be reframed to address these new challenges. The answer starts with a new vision – one that maintains excellent customer service, delivers the increased recycling opportunities that people have come to expect, applauds rather than regulates corporate recycling champions, and seeks to reduce the overall cost to taxpayers all while reducing our overall waste stream. We envision a future where the City's top ranking in recycling and waste reduction actions is paired with the City's friendly and responsive service reputation tradition.

The new gold standard can be operationalized through a Waste Management Plan prioritizing waste reduction, the concrete actions the ESC proposes below as well as countless future innovations by the Public Works Department who have successfully executed the “gold standard” we enjoy today. The ESC identified the following areas of recycling: commercial, residential, green recycling, e-recycling, and public recycling. This report briefly summarizes the ESC's findings and recommendations in each category.

I Commercial Recycling

Commercial recycling is the area of city recycling that offers the greatest opportunity to raise our recycling rate. Recycling is the law for businesses and many companies have internal recycling commitments. However, there is not currently in place a satisfactory means of tracking or reporting recycling, no imposed penalties for non-participation and little incentive for participation by businesses. Currently, the number of businesses reporting is small (less than 5% per 2011 data). The current report

format is difficult to calculate, for example it requires estimation of tonnages, which may be difficult or impossible, especially for small businesses. Yet many businesses in the city recycle large quantities of materials already. Improvement of commercial recycling participation and tracking thus could boost the city's recycling rate substantially.

1. **Improve reporting in the short term.** Coordinate with the County of Fairfax to capitalize on their labor intensive data collection program. Preliminary analysis added 2,800 tons or an increase of 7% in the City's recycling rate. Update City's questionnaire to include recyclables such as electronics, plastic bags, food waste, cooking oil, etc and simplify the way companies report their data. Finally, coordinate with high impact businesses/haulers to get recycling data with minimal effort.
2. **Improve future reporting - consider the benefits of a voluntary reporting program.** Rather than require all to submit a report, create incentives for City businesses to report recycling activities while applauding the ones who do it well. Pilot the use of the Federal Government's WasteWise program or create a custom VEP program.
3. **Nudge companies towards higher recycling rates.** Recycling offers direct financial benefits in the form of selling cardboard and other materials. Create additional financial incentives by waiving the 1x per week hauling requirement to those businesses who qualify as 'recycling champions.'
4. Pilot the use of a national reporting and tracking system called Re-Trac (free) in place of current reporting system.
5. Consider coordinating commercial recycling reporting with business license renewals.

II Recycling at Public Events, Parks and Facilities

This represents a major opportunity for increased recycling and increased awareness. A large component of municipal recycling programs is the development of recycling methods at government facilities, public events and related community activities.

1. **Offer 'rentable' recycling bins for public events.** Follow the lead of many localities by offering event coordinators the infrastructure needed to recycle. Fairfax and Loudoun Counties have offered to provide startup recycling bins at no cost. Even the use of spare residential bins might be sufficient at some events.
2. **Include recycling in rental agreements** for use of city parks and buildings
3. **Develop partnerships.** Seek volunteers from schools and civic organizations to help at events and facilitate park recycling activities.
4. **Install highly visible recycling bins in city buildings.** If installed over time, this can be a low cost, high impact solution.

III Residential Recycling

The current blue bin system is adequate but can be improved at relatively low cost by focusing efforts on improvement related to participation and engagement. Perhaps most importantly, residential

recycling represents the best opportunity for raising awareness and support for the city's waste management efforts.

1. **Offer large roller recycling bins.** The trends are clear – the bigger the container, the more people recycle. Many residents will find them easier to use as well. The City could provide larger bins through a phased approach or work with vendors to make larger bins available for purchase by interested residents and neighborhoods at area hardware stores.
2. **Strategic/Targeted Marketing.** Focus on high impact audiences. Rebrand with fresh material. Opportunities include:
 - a. Marketing program, such as "City of Fairfax Recycles!" that would connect civic pride to act of recycling and waste reduction.
 - b. Raise awareness and interest through existing sources - Cityscene, eMas, civic associations, and civic groups, with the assistance of Mayor and City Council members as spokespersons
 - c. Provide copies of the illustrated guide to curbside recycling to neighborhoods for distribution - consider alternate formats such as refrigerator magnets
 - d. Develop a parallel illustrated guide for all items that residents can recycle
 - e. Translate recycling information into major second languages of city
 - f. Continuation and improvement of the recycling notices, "Recycl-emails" program begun by the ESC that is sent to each homeowner and civic association on a regular basis to provide updates and information about recycling to share with neighbors through newsletters and emails.
3. **Develop an incentive and encouragement program** that will highlight the positive actions residents take to recycle and reduce waste. Possibly use friendly competitions (neighborhood vs neighborhood) to motivate increased recycling activities.

IV Green Recycling

The city currently collects yard waste, including grass clippings, plant material, trees and leaves. Commercial companies remove the yard waste that they create. The city also stipulates the size of debris, however, in practice generally collects what is left at the curb. Landscapers hired by residents often leave green material at the curbside as well despite city efforts to educate citizens. Currently homeowners use plastic bags, paper bags, no bags, bundles, and trash cans for yard waste. Program's success keeps the City's recycling rate among the best in the State.

1. **Standardize containers.** Determination should be made and publicized about appropriate containers and about acceptability of contractor generated green material left for curbside pickup.
2. **On-site residential composting of yard materials,** mulch mowing, and potentially in-city mulch production.

V E-recycling

The City Council expressed interest in starting an e-recycling program. The ESC researched the costs and returns of programs in other jurisdictions and found that these collections are expensive relative to the amounts collected. Assuming costs similar to Fairfax County's e-recycling contract (\$.10/lb) and two public events (\$1800 each), the City could expect to spend between \$5,000-\$10,000 hosting their own program. Instead the ESC recommends that the city partner with local businesses. In Fairfax County Best Buy stores alone collected 1/3 the amount of electronics Fairfax County's in-house program collected last year. Establish partnerships to increase the recycling rate, help local businesses and keep city costs low.

Conclusion: A successful recycling program will identify the specific goals, outreach plan, partnering opportunities and staff support necessary. There is great potential for improving the overall recycling program with the greatest improvement in recycling rates coming from tracking and encouraging commercial recycling efforts, while the best opportunity for increasing awareness of the city's waste management challenges will come from increased participation and awareness programs directed at residents. Lastly, recycling and waste reduction needs to occur at public events and public venues to make the city's commitment to recycling visible. The ESC has focused on opportunities that can be pursued at relatively low cost. However, there is evidence that a well thought out outreach program will help pay for itself in waste minimization and recycling improvements and the ESC recommends that the city investigate the potential of such a program.

Respectfully submitted 5/8/13